

ACTIONS TOWARDS SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND SUSTAINABLE NEIGHBOURHOODS IN ZURICH, SWITZERLAND

APPROACH

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Access to suitable and affordable housing is typically difficult for disadvantaged groups in Switzerland. These often include people with few professional qualifications, various kinds of handicaps or few financial resources. Among them are migrants and refugees, elderly people and the 'working poor' who receive no social benefits and who all too often fall through the social safety-net. Many live under precarious circumstances in Switzerland: when they have no rental contract or only a short-term tenancy, when the rent costs are too high in relation to income and lead to indebtedness, and when the accommodation is not adequate.

The tighter the housing market – as for example in Zurich – the smaller their chances.

Here we focus on the problems of social integration of foreign-born residents who are socially and economically disadvantaged. After briefly introducing the general importance of (non-municipal) cooperative non-profit housing associations in Zurich, we picked one exemplary project as a successful approach to integration in non-profit housing as we forecast their importance for the future. The integration of disadvantaged people will take on greater urgency, knowing their shrinking chances on the housing market.

THE SWISS HOUSING MARKET

In Switzerland there is no national policy of 'social housing' as in some other European countries. However, the question of who has easier access to what form of housing is answered differently in different places. Due to the distinct Swiss federal system, the organisation of housing provision for people who cannot find a flat without difficulty varies from canton to canton and from city to city. This study therefore focuses on Zurich, the largest Swiss city. With around 407 000 inhabitants, Zurich is relatively small but the metropolitan area neighbouring the city includes around 1.5 million people. In addition, the pressure of growth has continued since the middle of the 1990s and the number of people with a migrant background has also increased.

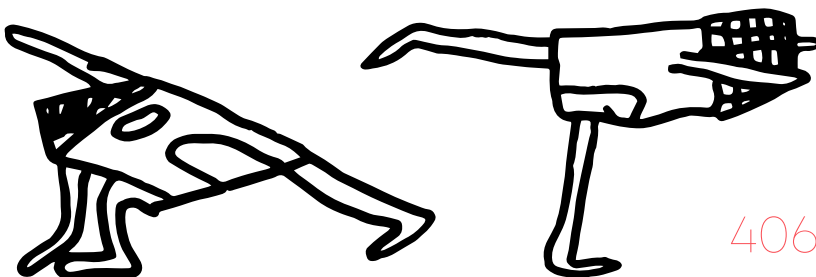
The excess demand for housing in Zurich led to an average increase in rents of around 10% in the last 15 years, despite a low inflation rate. For new tenancies the market prices increased by 18% over the same period (Statistics City of Zurich, 2013). The average net market rent for a 3.5 room flat on the outskirts of the city was around CHF 2 575.

The fact that Zurich remains a socially-mixed, lively and attractive city is thanks to the historically high proportion of non-profit housing construction. Whereas the proportion of non-profit housing in the whole of Switzerland was down to only 4% in 2014, in Zurich more than 150 smaller and larger non-profit housing associations have at their disposal around 20% of more than 210 000 flats. A further 4,5% of the non-profit housing stock belongs to the city (Statistics City of Zurich, 2018)

FINANCIAL AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

Particularly in larger cities and in regions with a tight housing market, like the one surrounding Lake Geneva, there are various state and non-state provisions for housing support. They provide and/or safeguard adequate housing for socially or economically disadvantaged people through various non-monetary forms of support (or in combination with financial support). This includes assistance in flat-seeking or housing integration, preventive measures to avoid eviction notice as well as sheltered and supervised housing.

The demand for counselling and support in seeking and safeguarding accommodation has exceeded available provision for years, and can best be compared to a drop in the ocean.



STIFTUNG DOMICIL

Stiftung Domicil (Domicil Foundation) is a relevant actor on the Zurich housing market with regard to finding and maintaining housing for, and integrating, low-income households who have hardly any chance of finding a suitable flat on their own.

Domicil supports families, single parents, the unemployed, people from other cultures, the so-called 'working poor' without social benefits, a group that has seen a sharp growth in recent years, people with debts and people on social benefits or disability pension in Zurich (Domicil Foundation, 2018). Domicil also provides support in flat-seeking and takes on joint liability for all tenancy agreements or is liable to the landlord for the agreement.

The foundation is financed via public authority contributions (performance mandate from the City of Zurich Social Department), membership contributions and donations. The combination of financial guarantees to landlords with the non-monetary provisions of housing integration and support, which are just as important, is especially promising here.

Domicil's success is based on the constant expansion and intensive fostering of a network with local landlords, public authorities and other actors from the local social and health network. Important partners of Domicil include larger professionally-run non-profit housing associations, as well as some newly founded ones that have open and tolerant values, reflected in inclusive housing practices. In return Domicil offers professional and successful preventive action to deal with possible conflicts on highly heterogeneous, socially and culturally, housing estates.

LUCHSWIESE ESTATE

The "Luchswiese" housing estate belongs to a municipal Foundation for Families with Many Children. It currently owns just over 500 flats which are rented to low-income families with at least 3 children. Because many of the families also have a migrant background, the proportion of these residents is higher than on other municipal estates or those of cooperative, non-profit housing associations. The Luchswiese housing estate in Zurich-Schwamendingen was built in 1994. The 40 flats each have 4 to 7 rooms, there is playground equipment for children of all ages in the courtyard and two kindergartens. The 230 residents, including 150 children and teenagers, come from 16 countries. Whereas at the beginning of the millennium, most tenants came from Switzerland or EU countries, ten years later the proportion of tenants from outside Central Europe was around 70%. Currently Schwamendingen is the urban quarter with the highest proportion of people without a Swiss passport at around 41% (Statistics City of Zurich, 2015).

In 2004 the Foundation commissioned the project to Stiftung Domicil (see above): A temporary social worker-post with a 40% workload was created. After conclusion of the project the social worker nevertheless remained available to a reduced extent as a kind of caretaker depending on demand (Barandun, 2012). The project was financially supported by the Federal Housing Office.

“FIT FOR THE FUTURE”- INVOLVING THE FATHERS

A broad participation process was set in motion in reaction to problems on the estate. Primarily noise at night, especially during the summer, caused by teenagers living on the estate but also from elsewhere. Their behaviour was perceived as threatening. At times there were leftover empty bottles and sometimes also syringes. Visits by the police and a security company hired by the housing management were of little use.

The aim of the project was therefore to improve intercultural life on the estate, to promote participation and support the empowerment of all participants. The special feature of this project was that fathers with a migrant background were specifically included. With their regular presence in the evenings they managed to establish contact with the teenagers and solve the problem of violence in the public space. In view of the diverse challenges of the Luchswiese estate, building functioning participation structures was rather complex.

The first phase included information and needs assessment. Direct contacts with residents – ‘doorstep work’ – was in the foreground. Particularly, to get the fathers involved, it was crucial to communicate that they are important actors for participation and problem solving. An intercultural fathers meeting was set up. The fathers had a central function in dealing with teenagers in the context of conflicts in public space. Supported by external specialists and violence-prevention bodies they worked out mutually-agreed, respectful codes of conduct for coexistence with the teenagers in the courtyard. At the beginning the fathers felt insecure and were sceptical about what they could achieve. By working together for a common aim, the fathers began to speak with one voice and their parental authority changed. Active fathers formed a network with a telephone list. If there were problems at least three of them would go out. With a few interventions they directly experienced the effect that their presence can have.

The fathers’ group was embedded in the structural participation bases that were set up at the beginning of the whole project. These included residents’ meetings for each building and tenants’ meetings for the whole estate. Other groups were formed such as for mothers, boys, teenagers, girls and a garden group. The new participative organisation took on responsibility and achieved visible results. This increased confidence in external specialists and in participants’ belief in their own capabilities. In order to make these processes sustainable, existing professional networks in the quarter were linked with the demand of groups being set up.

CONCLUSION

Integration in housing is not a category that relates only to migrants or to special, particularly targeted housing projects. Integration is a two-sided process of approach and negotiation that is part of the everyday reality of our lives. The challenges are increasing migration from all parts of the world, migrants with sometimes extremely traumatic experiences of fleeing conflict, and greater social heterogeneity.

Approaches such as that of the Domicil Foundation in Zurich, which before all other measures, enables access to affordable urban housing in neighbourly coexistence for disadvantaged people, are necessary preconditions. Financial help such as taking on temporary joint liability for the tenancy agreement, together with non-monetary measures such as help in flat-seeking, housing coaching as far as professionally supervised living form the basis for integration.

The Zurich housing project described here shows that successful integration requires participation. Those who are asked and can have their say will get more involved in the community discussion and be more committed to taking part in shaping their own estate. Structural channels of participation and codetermination concerned with the use of space but also with the development of a neighbourly exchange of ideas and experience and life together are central for successful communication. As shown in the example, expert support is essential from the beginning of the project. Intervention is certainly possible when conflicts already exist but it is complex and prolonged. As the Luchswiese example shows, serious problems that already exist in neighbourhoods can be successfully addressed with participative, empowering strategies. Many Zurich housing cooperatives with new approaches focus on participation, sometimes already in the planning phase, before occupation and especially during the operational phase.

Experience from the housing projects once again points to the central social role of the caretaker on estates with a high proportion of people with a migration background and this can certainly generally apply to larger housing estates (Brech & Feigelfeld, 2017). Of course, successful integration also has spatial implications. It requires a variety of good, soundproofed flats on an estate with which residents can identify, providing community rooms, outdoor spaces that promote communication and good infrastructure. However, networking with other relevant actors and the city, concerning social and cultural issues, is just as important.

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